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PAN-SLAVIC IDEAS IN MODERN RUSSIAN POLITICAL IMAGINATION AND THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Abstract. The Purpose of the Research. Whether the Russian war against Ukraine has been ideologically motivated constitutes a part of a broader discussion of a revanchist turn in Russia's foreign policy. The period since the dissolution of the Soviet Union witnessed a quest for a new state ideology and the emergence of various forms of modern Russian nationalism. In this context, the Pan-Slavic ideas that spread in academic, quasi-academic, and political spheres in the decades preceding the full-scale invasion deserve particular attention. **The Methodology of Research.** Critical discourse analysis of speeches, official statements, and media publications was used to detect embedded messages and compare them to sentiments typical of Pan-Slavic doctrine. **The Research Novelty.** Such an approach allowed to identify particular elements in the Russian official discourse and propaganda dating back to the late imperial times and explain the role of such elements in the ideological justification of the war against Ukraine. **Conclusions.** The ideas and symbols influencing how the Russian leadership presents themselves on the global stage often draw from characteristics commonly associated with Pan-Slavism. One of the outcomes has been framing the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a battle of civilizations to prevent Ukraine's westernization and position it as “anti-Russia”. The Russian nationalism emphasizes the unity and strength of the Russian nation, viewing Ukraine as an integral part of a broader Russian identity. This approach has been fueled by a sense of historical injustice and a desire to regain what is accepted as lost influence and territories in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Top officials, including Vladimir Putin himself, have consistently employed the isolationist, quasi-Orthodox, and messianic language. As circumstances evolve, they adjust their rhetoric pragmatically, but Pan-Slavic concepts serve as one of the foundations for the growing appeal of civilizational discourse.

Keywords: Pan-Slavism, Russian imperialism, propaganda, war against Ukraine.

ПАНСЛОВ'ЯНСЬКІ ІДЕЇ В СУЧАСНІЙ РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ПОЛІТИЧНІЙ УЯВІ І ВІЙНА СУПРОТИ УКРАЇНИ

Анотація. Мета дослідження. Питання про те, чи була війна Росії проти України ідеологічно вмотивованою, є частиною ширшої дискусії про реваншистський поворот у російській зовнішній політиці. Період після розпаду Радянського Союзу став часом пошуків нової державної ідеології та появи різних форм сучасного російського націоналізму. У цьому контексті на особливу увагу заслуговують панслов'янські ідеї, які поширювалися в академічній, навколоакадемічній та політичній сферах протягом десятиліть, що передували повномасштабному вторгненню.

Методологія дослідження включала критичний дискурс-аналіз виступів, офіційних заяв, публікацій у ЗМІ, що уможливило виявити вбудовані повідомлення та зіставити їх з тезами, характерними для панславистської доктрини.

Новизна дослідження. Такий підхід дав змогу розпізнати ті елементи в російському офіційному дискурсі та пропаганді, які сягають пізньої імперських часів, і пояснити їх роль в ідеологічному виправданні війни супроти України.

Висновки. Концепції та символи, які впливають на те, як російське керівництво уявляє і себе, і свою роль на світовій арені, часто спираються на характеристики, які асоціюються з панслов'янськими ідеями. Як наслідок, російсько-український конфлікт представляють битвою цивілізацій з метою запобігти вестернізації України та викрити її нібито "антиросійську" сутність. Російський націоналізм розглядає Україну як невід'ємну частину ширшої російської ідентичності. Цей підхід підживлюється відчуттям історичної несправедливості та бажанням повернути, як вважається, втрачений вплив і території у Східній Європі та колишньому Радянському Союзі. Ізоляціоністська, псевдоправославна і месіанська мова постійно використовується вищими посадовими особами, включаючи Володимира Путіна. Хоча вони прагматично пристосовують свій дискурс до конкретних обставин, панслов'янські ідеї є одним із джерел дедалі популярнішої цивілізаційної риторики.

Ключові слова: панславизм, російський імперіалізм, пропаганда, війна проти України.

The Problem statement. Whether the Russian war against Ukraine has been ideologically motivated constitutes a part of a broader discussion of a revanchist turn in the Russian foreign policy. In retrospect, it is evident that the period since the dissolution of the Soviet Union witnessed the quest for a new state ideology and the emergence of various forms of modern Russian nationalism, including civic, ethnic, imperial, and Eurasian versions. In this context, the Pan-Slavic ideas that spread in academic, quasi-academic, and political spheres in the decades preceding the full-scale invasion deserve particular attention.

The Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. One prevalent perspective postulates that contemporary Russian elites have primarily focused on a personal enrichment and political survival without a solid ideological drive (Gessen, 2012; Harding, 2011; Zygat, 2016). Another influential trend emphasizes the pragmatic considerations behind the aggressive geopolitical moves. According to such a *Realpolitik* approach, Russia's strategic interests in Ukraine are linked to its location, economic ties, and access to important resources. Scholars stress various domestic and international factors shaping Russia's policies within this paradigm (Toal, 2017, p. 298). A central theme that transcends not just Russian propaganda but also academic discussions revolves around the allegedly pivotal role played by the West, particularly the United States, in initiating and escalating the conflict among Slavic nations (Mearsheimer, 2014). The accepted advance of Western influence in Ukraine, especially after the 2014 Maidan Revolution, in Russia has been interpreted as threatening its security and interests (Miller & Wert, 2015). However, as convincingly demonstrated by Ihor Torbakov, foreign policy development goes beyond a rational assessment of economic interests or geopolitical positions. According to this perspective, other factors, including political imagination, historical myths, and symbolic geographies, influence geopolitical

decisions (Torbakov, 2018). Recent researches by Marlène Laurelle, Timothy Snyder, and Jane Burbank also shed light on the ideological currents that have converged in Russia, ultimately leading to the invasion of Ukraine (Burbank, 2022; Laurelle, 2019; Snyder, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to do the research on the influence of Pan-Slavic ideas in contemporary Russia by following the ways they spread in academic, quasi-academic, and political spheres in the decades preceding the full-scale invasion. After contextualizing the messages embedded in speeches, official statements, and media and considering historical parallels, it will be shown that these narratives contain discursive elements dating back to the late imperial times.

The Research Results. Historically, the Slavophile-Westernizer divide emerged during the era of Romanticism in opposition to liberal ideas coming from the West and attempts to modernize Russia according to European models (Walicki, 2015, p. 167). Russian Slavophilism developed as a “conservative criticism of modern society”, and as such, it appealed to Russia’s Slavonic origins, Orthodox faith, and the traditional wisdom of the people (Rabow-Edling, 2006, p. 1). In the writings by Alexei Khomiakov, Konstantin Aksakov, Yury Samarin, and Ivan Kireevsky, Russia appeared as the Holy Land of God’s chosen people. At the same time, any pro-European orientation (including Petrine reforms) constituted the betrayal of its Slavic roots (Walicki, 2015, pp. 167–173). The Slavophiles believed in an impassable barrier between Russia and the West caused by historically distinct sets of spiritual principles and the superiority of the said principles over the “false” values of the West (Riasanovsky, 1952, p. 3). Another essential aspect of Slavophiles’ worldview, the nostalgic longing for the past, gave Andrzej Walicki the reason to define their philosophy as conservative utopianism: “*utopianism* because it was a comprehensive and detailed vision of a social ideal, sharply contrasted to existing realities; and *conservative*, or even reactionary because it was an ideal located in the past” (Walicki, 2015, p. 183).

Eventually, Slavophile ideology came to play a significant role in Russian intellectual and political tradition. In the mid-1850s, the profound sense of national humiliation caused by Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War gave rise to a powerful aspiration to revive Russian national glory. This, in turn, spurred a transition from Slavophilism to Pan-Slavism (Kovalchuk, 2019, p. 139). Later on, the 1863 Polish uprising played a pivotal role in reshaping Slavophilism into a more comprehensive agenda that aimed at the “nationalization” of the Russian Empire. This involved the “subordination of its internal policy to Russian ethno-nationalism, and its external policy to Pan-Slavism” (Walicki, 2015, p. 200). A militant programme of the Russian expansion in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East emerged in the writings of Ivan Aksakov, Iurii Samarin, and Nikolai Danilevskii (Kohn, 1953, pp. 158–159). Since then the all-Slavonic mission became an inseparable part of Russia’s political programme.

Nikolai Danilevskii, a Russian conservative philosopher and a prominent Pan-Slavist, authored a book in 1869 that is widely regarded as the “first and only ... systematic exposition of Russian political Pan-Slavism philosophy” (Walicki, 2015, p. 339) or even a “codex and catechism” of the doctrine (MacMaster, 1967, p. 123). Danilevskii categorized civilizations into distinct types based on their dominant cultural and historical characteristics. He identified Europe as belonging to the Franco-German cultural-historical type and posited that its influence would gradually wane, giving way to the rise of a new Slavic civilization. Since Russia and Europe, in his view, represented different cultural-historical types, he believed it was both impossible and harmful to apply European models to Russian conditions. Danilevskii asserted that Russia’s foreign policy should be driven by Slavic interests, aiming

to dismantle the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and establish the Slavic Federation under the Russian Tsar. As noted by Walicki, such a “programmatically political immoralism was bound to be most convenient for Russian great-power chauvinism” (Walicki, 2015, p. 341). Ukraine was accepted by Danilevskii not just a sphere of influence, but as an inherent and inseparable part of the broader all-Russian nation. He argued that Russia never truly “conquered” this territory, as it was impossible to conquer something that had always been considered its natural extension (Danilevskii, 2013, p. 321).

Danilevskii’s popularity in Russia and interest in Slavic ideas in general correlate with the country’s political situation and dominant geopolitical agenda. During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 – 78, a surge of Pan-Slavic enthusiasm led to the complete sale of all copies of his *magnum opus*, published eight years prior. In post-Soviet Russia, the interest in the heritage of influential Pan Slavists became visible as early as 1991 when 70,000 copies of “Russia and Europe” appeared in print. Over the next two decades, numerous editions of the book were published (in 1995, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2010, and 2013), including a luxurious version in 1995. Additionally, an English translation of the book by Stephen M. Woodburn was made available in 2013 (Danilevskii, 2013).

Just as the humiliation experienced during the Crimean War fueled the emergence of Pan-Slavism, the identity crisis that followed the collapse of the USSR and the upheaval of post-Soviet socio-economic transformations triggered a sense of nostalgia among a significant portion of the Russian population (Yanov, 2007). In both instances, Russia found itself on the losing side against the West, with the USSR considered a form of the Russian civilization. The loss prompted many to become deeply concerned about “Russia’s stature as a great nation with not only unique but superior characteristics. Hence they employed Slavophile conceptions as part of the ideology of national patriotism” (Scanlan, 1994, p. 45).

A renewed interest in Slavophilism emerged first in academic circles, although many academic discussions were already full of political implications. At the beginning of the 1990s, Yevgenii Troitskii founded the Association of the Comprehensive Study of the Russian Nation. Troitskii’s viewpoints can be characterized as chauvinistic, as he firmly believed in “not simply the value and uniqueness, but the superiority of “Holy Russia” over Western society and culture, echoing a similar conviction on the part of early Slavophiles” (Scanlan, 1994, p. 46). Additionally, he propagated the idea, consistent with Danilevskii’s thinking, that the West had already exhausted its spiritual resources while “the genius of the Slavdom” had not been yet to be revealed.

Established in 1993, the Institute of Russian Civilization is another example of a quasi-academic organization, primarily focusing on the publication of significant texts by the Russian intellectuals dealing with the evolution of the Russian national worldview. These works are aimed at showcasing Russia’s resistance to what the institute’s leadership characterizes as “global evil, Russophobia, and racism”. The statement also reveals cooperation with the movement toward creating the All-Slavic Union. To this end, IRC published three volumes of “The Slavic Encyclopedia,” the historical encyclopedia “Slavophiles”, and several volumes of works by prominent Russian Pan-Slavists.

A noticeable revival of interest in the life and heritage of Danilevskii was also quite symptomatic (Kovalchuk, 2019). As early as 1994, a team of volunteers coordinated memorial readings and uncovered his previously unknown grave in the Crimean town of Foros. Notably, years later, the leader of this group, affiliated with the local university, emerged as one of the ardent supporters of what state propaganda labeled the “Russian Spring.” Then he openly

referred to the heritage of prominent Pan-Slavist while attempting to justify Russia's actions in the Crimea and Ukraine in general: "Danilevskii's book is a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of whether Russia has the right as an independent civilization ... to develop according to its internal laws or it should be a pathetic appendage ... to a hostile civilization" (Kiselev, 2014).

The Danilevskii Institute of Russian-Slavic Civilization also actively stimulates discussions on contemporary political matters by applying the "civilizational" perspective in addition to its research and publishing activities. The institute manages an online platform and multiple social media channels, providing commentary on the Russian domestic and foreign policy aspects as events unfold. Their Telegram channel with the characteristic name "Russia is not Europe" belongs to the ultra-nationalist segment of the social media landscape.

Many researchers point out not only the importance of Danilevskii's text in modern Russian intellectual history but also "its impact on the thinking of a growing number of twenty-first-century readers". Stephen M. Woodburn calls Danilevskii's book an "essential background for Russian Pan-Slavism and Eurasianism, the ideologies best poised to inform Russian policy over the next decades", and thus – the most important 19th-century book for the post-Soviet period (Danilevskii, p. XXV). Michel Elchaninoff, a French philosopher, considers Danilevskii one of the primary sources of the official ideology of contemporary Russia (Eltchaninoff, 2015). The Russian intellectual historian Alexandr Yanov observes that Danilevskii "most fully, accurately and frankly formulated – and thereby brought to the point of absurdity – one of the three historical perspectives of the country, which seems to be the most popular in Russia today" having in mind contrasting Russia with Europe as a civilization fundamentally alien and hostile to it (Yanov, 2007).

Some of the arguments Russian president made in his well-known article "Russia. The Ethnicity Issue" (2012) also showed parallels to Pan-Slavic ideas and included allusions to the ideas of Danilevskii (Malykhina, 2014, p. 50). "The Russian people are state-builders... Their great mission is to unite and bind together a civilization ... This kind of civilizational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture, although this culture is represented not only by ethnic Russians but by all the holders of this identity, regardless of their ethnicity" (Putin, 2012). Ideas from Danilevskii's work appeared in the speeches of Putin on multiple occasions, both explicitly and implicitly. Using the concept of state-civilization as a marker of pertinent discourse, one can discern their presence, often filled with particular significance: "It is precisely the state-civilization model that has shaped our state polity", said Putin addressing the Valdai forum in 2013 (President of Russia, 2013).

The interest in the legacy of influential Pan-Slavists reflected a broader quest for a new ideology or a new "Russian idea" as well as a sense of "ontological insecurity" and an identity crisis in post-Soviet Russia (Tsygankov, 2017, p. 586). Nationalist tendencies gained momentum in the country, sometimes "deviating into a racist and xenophobic character" when parties with strong nationalist platforms rooted in notions of Slavic superiority saw their influence grow in the Duma (Çiçek, 2012, p. 112).

Putin began to employ the rhetoric of civilization and emphasize Russia's distinctive values more prominently following his return to power in 2012, a period marked by corrupted parliamentary elections and subsequent protests that were suppressed. He positioned Russia as a global champion of conservative values and adopted the language of civilization to justify his new domestic and foreign policy direction (Tsygankov, 2017, pp. 583–585). Putin's new ideological agenda meant, among other things, the popularization of "traditional values" close to Slavophile philosophy (Zygar, 2016, pp. 248–249).

These claims have been based on the idea of the moral superiority of Slavic nations against the decadent and spiritually inferior West. Putin commented on this topic on multiple occasions. In one of his most extensive monologues on the subject at the Valdai Forum in 2013, when he speculated that “many Euro-Atlantic countries are rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They deny moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships and belief in God with the belief in Satan” (President of Russia, 2013, July 19).

Russia’s view of Europe changed diametrically during Putin’s years, from claiming that Russia is a part of Europe to the idea that it “constitutes a self-sustained civilization distinct from the European one” (Torbakov, 2017, p. 241). A deterioration in relations with Western countries accompanied the shift toward a more authoritarian stance within Russia. According to Richard Sakwa, Putin’s third term aimed to position Russia as an autonomous force in global politics through a strategy of neo-revisionism (Sakwa, 2020, p. 234). Ukrainian geopolitical move towards the West (especially evident after 2014) served as another reason behind Russia’s “civilizational self-determination”. Euromaidan promoted and protected the vision of Ukraine as part of Europe and relied on its values. Predictably, in Russian official discourse it was interpreted as a Western plot directed against the Russian Federation.

The abovementioned pretext was presented as a reason for the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This action faced widespread condemnation from the United States and European countries, deemed a breach of international law. During this time, Putin’s government increasingly stressed the significance of Russia’s sovereignty and the imperative of protecting its interests. It frequently positioned Russia as a counterbalance to the Western world on the global stage. The narrative of Western “hostility” toward Russia gained further traction when the European Union and the United States imposed economic sanctions. According to this reasoning, consistent with Pan-Slavic ideology, Russia asserted its right to disregard international law, perceiving it as a product of a distinct and adversarial civilization. For example, Putin informed his audience that there was “every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, continues today” (Putin, 2014). In another president’s speech, delivered after the commencement of the full-scale war, certain portions also focused on the purported “pressure” exerted by the West to manipulate Russia for its geopolitical objectives. The speech also featured a citation from Danilevskii, referred to as a “great Russian philosopher” (President of Russia, 2022). In practical terms, Russian leadership was claiming the ability to act as a regional hegemon and ruin international order, displaying what Torbakov defined as an “obsessive quest for greatness” (Torbakov, 2018, p. 247). It is also the reason behind Moscow’s attempts to portray Russia as a state-civilization in its own right, clearly separate from Europe, refusing to play a role (allegedly prescribed for her in European identity discourses) of the “eternal apprentice”(Miller & Lukyanov, 2016).

Ukraine’s role in the relationship between Europe and Russia has been crucial. Moreover, Ukraine is often considered the singular and most significant reason for the confrontation between these entities (Torbakov, 2018). The years preceding the full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2024 witnessed numerous proofs. While public speeches before 2014 demonstrate the need to recognize Ukrainian independence conventionally, they still revealed a skeptical approach. One characteristic example comes from Putin’s speech at the 2013 Valdai forum: “I want to repeat again; we are one people. Of course, the Ukrainian

people, the Ukrainian culture, and the Ukrainian language have wonderful features that make up the identity of the Ukrainian nation. And we not only respect it, but moreover, I, for one, really love it; I like all of it. It is part of our greater Russian, or Russian-Ukrainian, world. But history has unfolded in such a way that today, this territory is an independent state, and we respect that” (President of Russia, 2013). The existence of the Ukrainian state is presented in this narrative as an accident (the formula “history has unfolded in such a way” is repeated at least twice), which does not change the obvious (for Putin) fact that it always belonged to the great Russian whole. Similarly to Danilevskii, Putin presented Kyiv as the birthplace of the Russian state and the source of Christianity: “Here at this site, at the baptismal site on the Dnieper River, a choice was made for the whole of Holy Rus, for all of us” (President of Russia, 2013, July 27).

Putin and his close aides repeatedly claimed that Ukraine suffered from the West’s attempts to undermine Slavic unity. Former defense minister Sergey Ivanov, said in a TASS interview in 2015 that “...Ukraine is a special case, millions of our people still live there... Mentally, religiously, and culturally, we have a lot in common. Including language. One Slavic people, there is nothing to argue about” (Ivanov, 2015). Importantly, Ivanov belongs to a particularly influential group of Russian officials commonly known as “siloviki” (“strongmen”). It is believed that representatives of this group, especially those from security services, were largely responsible for the aggressive turn of Russia’s foreign policy (Kragh & Umland, 2023). The views of Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, reflect Russia’s official position pretty well. On multiple occasions, he ascribed what he called “the Ukrainian crisis” to the “systemic activities of the United States and its closest allies” attempting to separate Ukraine from Russia (Patrushev, 2014). Generally the abovementioned circle interpreted Western geopolitical orientation as a conscious anti-Russian policy to hurt it by targeting its very core. By appealing to the past, they were borrowing ideas from a “rich reservoir of metaphors, meanings, images, and tropes created over the past 200 years by Russian conservative and nationalist thinkers” (Torbakov, 2018, p. 246). The Russian variant of Pan-Slavic ideology does not just emphasize politically relevant cultural similarities among different Slavic-speaking peoples. Rather, it asserts that the “Great Russians” (ethnic Russians), “White Russians” (the Belarusians), and “Malorosy” (the Ukrainians) collectively constitute the “Russian people”. According to this ideology, they are part of a single East Slavic Orthodox/Russian super-nation or civilization.

Historical narratives have also been manipulated to support the image of Russia as a superpower with legitimate interests in the region and view of Ukraine as a part of a broader Russian nation (Torbakov, 2018, p. 238). In 2021, Putin’s essay, “On Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, expanded on his recurring assertion that the Ukrainians and the Russians constitute “one people” and Russia and Ukraine are “the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space”. According to this text, “historical unity” did not refer to common historical events or processes but rather to “malorussian cultural identity” that existed only within “the greater Russian nation”. Towards the conclusion of the article, Putin made at least seven references to the “anti-Russia” project, which, in his viewpoint, Western nations are attempting to execute within the borders of Ukraine (President of Russia, 2021). The author denied Ukraine any agency and blamed the Soviet national policy for the emergence of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian peoples instead of what he called “the large Russian nation, a triune people comprising the Velykorussians, the Malorussians, and the Belorussians”. He presented modern Ukraine as “entirely the product of the Soviet era”

shaped “on the lands of historical Russia”. Such “lectures on history” figured prominently in Putin’s speeches before and during the invasion of Ukraine, as noted by observers from both inside and outside Russia (Miller, 2023; Torbakov, 2016).

In the abovementioned article, one can also identify the central motif, used less than two years later to justify the aggression against Ukraine, namely the pledge not to “allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia” (President of Russia, 2021). Ann Applebaum correctly assessed the article as an “essentially a call to arms, laying the groundwork for a Russian invasion of Ukraine” (Applebaum, 2021). Indeed, in his address to the nation on February 21, 2022, Putin used exactly the same language to justify imminent invasion, emphasizing that “Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space” (President of Russia, 2022). This introduction set the stage for Russia’s subsequent invasion of Ukraine.

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, Putin delivered a new speech as a formal declaration of war. In this address, he explicitly claimed the “territories adjacent to Russia”, which he asserted were historically Russian lands. According to his narrative, these regions were witnessing the emergence of a hostile and “anti-Russia” presence. He squarely blamed “irresponsible Western politicians” for creating military threats near Russia’s borders and attempting to erode the traditional values of the Russian people while imposing what he described as “false values”. According to Putin, these alleged false values contradict human nature and lead to societal degradation.

It is well known that Putin and his aides have anticipated a swift and triumphant military campaign. It is, therefore, not surprising that different groups of propagandists prematurely celebrated the presumed conquest of Ukraine. The article released by the Russian state information agency on February 26, 2022, titled “The Emergence of Russia and New World” once again reiterated the crucial ideological justifications for the war: “Russia is restoring its historical fullness, gathering the Russian world, the Russian people together – in its entirety of Great Russians, Belarusians and Little Russians” (Akopov, 2022).

On February 28, “Literary Gazette” published an open letter, signed by 500 writers and poets, expressing their full support for the so called “Special Military operation” and blaming the West for nurturing animosity between the Slavs: “The pitting of the Slavs among themselves is unacceptable. We, the Russians, do not want to pit anyone against anyone! The Russians do not start a war. The Russians usually finish it. Russia’s special military operation is aimed at bringing peace to Europe. We love the Ukrainian people, we sing the Ukrainian songs, we watch the Ukrainian movies, we pray in the same churches” (Literary Gazette, 2022, February 28).

The fact that the motives of Slavic unity are persistently present in the official discourse proves the potential of the Pan-Slavic myth on the one hand and the imperial character of Russian ideological searches on the other. As the closest Slavic neighbour, Ukraine occupies a special place on the Russian mental map because “it is where the *imperial* and the *national* meet”. To put it differently, controlling this territory is crucial for preserving the status of great power and “the cornerstone of what might be termed the Russian imperial mindset” (Torbakov, 2018, pp. 239–240).

The Conclusions. The ideas and symbols influencing how the Russian leadership presents themselves on the global stage often draw from characteristics commonly associated with Pan-Slavism. In particular, this worldview contains the messianic belief that Russia has a special task to lead the Slavic nations and protect Orthodoxy and Slavic cultures.

The Russian politicians and “opinion leaders” often insist on the moral superiority of the Slavic world over the “materialistic” and “cynical” West, which is typical for conservative Slavophile doctrine. This has resulted, among other things, in framing the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a civilizational struggle aimed at preventing the westernization of Ukraine and positioning it as “anti-Russia”. The Russian nationalism emphasizes the unity and strength of the Russian nation, viewing Ukraine as an integral part of a broader Russian identity. This approach has been fueled by a sense of historical injustice and a desire to regain what is accepted as lost influence and territories in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Top officials, including Vladimir Putin himself, have consistently employed the isolationist, quasi-Orthodox, and messianic language. As circumstances evolve, they adjust their rhetoric pragmatically, but Pan-Slavic concepts serve as one of the foundations for the growing appeal of civilizational discourse.

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